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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7554  
INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 9379  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 000190

SIPDIS

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DEPT. FOR NEA GGRAY, IRF FOR AGOMBIS, S/CT FOR EINGALLS,  
AND NEA/ARP FOR ASTEINFELD/RJACHIM/SRAMESH.

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/08/2018

TAGS: [PTER](#) [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: CONFRONTING INTOLERANCE IN SAUDI MOSQUES

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Michael Gfoeller for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Acting/DCM and PolOff met with Assistant Deputy Minister for Islamic Affairs (MOIA) Dr. Abdullah al-Lheedan on February 3 to discuss SAG efforts to combat extremism. Al-Lheedan focused on SAG efforts to monitor and rehabilitate intolerant imams. He also touched on the charities and textbooks reforms. According to al-Lheedan, the SAG supports approximately 70,000 imams inside Saudi Arabia and 500 overseas imams. A country-wide program, which began in 2003, continues to monitor and re-educate imams with "wrong interpretations of relations with non-Muslims and non-Muslim countries." The SAG fired 1300 imams between 2003-2006; however, some returned to their posts after reeducation and reconciliation with the SAG. In general, al-Lheedan considered the program successful, because there were fewer "bad imams" reported in 2007. The SAG has a program for monitoring its imams abroad, but it is less robust than the domestic program. In addition to rehabilitating imams, al-Lheedan underscored the importance of re-educating teachers, whose wrong interpretations of textbooks and religious precepts, is more dangerous than the texts themselves. END SUMMARY.

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MOIA BACKGROUND  
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12. (C) Acting/DCM and PolOff met with Assistant Deputy Minister for Islamic Affairs Dr. Abdullah al-Lheedan on February 3 to discuss SAG efforts to combat extremism. Al-Lheedan, who received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Southern California, directs the external programs of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Call, Guidance, and Endowments (MOIA). He has traveled extensively throughout Africa, monitoring MOIA-funded programs, and is preparing to visit India and Pakistan shortly for the same purpose. Al-Lheedan began by noting that MOIA is part of the Saudi Government. King Fahd established the ministry in 1993 to provide a bridge between the semi-autonomous religious leadership and the SAG. According to al-Lheedan, the MOIA's first minister, Dr. Abdullah al-Turki, was a good manager, but "not effective" with the religious communities. Al-Turki left MOIA after seven years and is now the Secretary General of the Muslim World League. Al-Lheedan labeled current MOIA Minister, Sheik Saleh bin Abdul Aziz Al al-Sheik, as a "reformer", a well respected descendant of Mohammed ibn Abdel Wahhab and someone able to unite different communities.

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SAG SUPPORT TO SAUDI AND FOREIGN IMAMS  
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¶3. (C) Al-Lheedan stated that the MOIA supports approximately 70,000 imams across the country. Imams are chosen by their congregations and approved by the MOIA. Based on the size of their congregation, imams receive monthly stipends of either USD 480, 580, or 690. In addition, imams who deliver the Friday prayers receive an additional monthly stipend of USD ¶425. Al-Lheedan added that the MOIA also supports 500 international imams, who receive on average USD 200-300 per month. Overseas, the MOIA prefers to support foreign imams who have studied in Saudi institutes, rather than Saudi imams. He remarked that the American program, which supported 6 American imams, ended after the September 11 attacks because of anti-Saudi sentiments. He confirmed that stipends for foreign and domestic imams only supplement their incomes, as all have other full-time jobs.

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SAG INSTITUTES FOR TRAINING IMAMS  
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¶4. (C) Al-Lheedan explained that there are three primary institutes for training Saudi imams -- Islamic University of Medina, Umm al-Qura University in Mecca, and Imam Mohammed bin Saud University in Riyadh. There are also three main institutes for training members of the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice -- Taiba University in Medina, Umm al-Qura University in Mecca, and Imam Mohammed bin Saud University in Riyadh. He described the Riyadh-based school as the most conservative and the Mecca-based school as the most open-minded. Most foreign students go to Medina

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SAG MONITORS SAUDI AND FOREIGN IMAMS  
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¶5. (C) In 2003 the MOIA created a program to monitor imams. The program created a committee of five to seven senior religious scholars in each Saudi province. Each committee supervises numerous three-man teams who monitor all mosques and imams within their province. Based on the teams' periodic reports, the provincial committees summon imams accused of preaching intolerance to meet with them and discuss their ideas. Senior sheiks have also urged ordinary citizens to report misguided imams to the MOIA. If the provincial religious scholars are not able to dissuade the deviant imam of his intolerant thinking, then the imam is summoned to Riyadh for a more intensive, longer-term training.

¶6. (C) The imam monitoring and rehabilitation program was intended to run from 2003 to 2006. However the current minister has extended the program till 2009. According to al-Lheedan, MOIA dismissed 1300 imams between 2003-2006 because they resisted changing their perspectives despite the provincial and Riyadh-based training. When asked why imams were actually fired, al-Lheedan replied that promoting intolerance of non-Muslims and non-Muslim countries was the MOIA's most serious concern. He added that some imams had returned to their posts after reconciliation with the MOIA. Al-Lheedan considered the program to be successful, because of the fewer "bad imams" being reported now.

¶7. (C) The 500 foreign imams are currently required to submit periodic written reports to MOIA officials describing their views of jihad, treatment of non-Muslims, and other Islamic concepts. Al-Lheedan did not regard this as adequate supervision since he could not confirm that what the imams wrote in a report to the Saudi Government necessarily reflected what they said in the mosque. However, it was difficult and expensive to monitor imams outside of the

country. Minister al Al-Sheik also considers the current arrangements inadequate and plans to establish an international monitoring program similar to the one operating in the Kingdom.

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SAG FORBIDS INTERNATIONAL FUNDRAISING IN MOSQUES  
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¶8. (C) According to al-Lheedan a Royal Order was issued several years ago to stop Saudi charities sending money overseas. Al-Leheedan said he knew about this because these charities had fallen under the MOIA jurisdiction. In this respect they differed from domestic charities which fall under the Ministry of Social Affairs and still collect funds to be spent locally. According to al-Leheedan, the Saudi government still sends funds abroad through organizations like the Red Crescent and Muslim World League. However, private fundraising for overseas charities, as opposed to government sanctioned and controlled fund drives, has stopped.

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EDUCATION REFORMS  
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¶9. (C) Al-leheedan said that like the Minister of Islamic Affairs, Education Minister Dr. Abdullah bin Saleh al-Obaid is also a reformer who can bring together diverse groups. As a former Secretary General of the Muslim World League and Rector of the Islamic University of Medina, Minister al-Obaid is well-respected by religious groups. Contrary to what some western observers thought his appointment represented not a step backwards, but a "practical way forward". Al-Lheedan considers al-Obaid to an effective reformer, who is spearheading the joint Ministry of Islamic Affairs-Ministry of Education anti-extremism campaign.

¶10. (C) In addition to rehabilitating imams, al-Lheedan stressed that it is vital to re-educate Saudi teachers. He noted that it is much more difficult to monitor the 300,000 teachers than 70,000 imams. He stated that textbooks are being revised to eliminate intolerant language. He described a chart from 2007 that outlined the changes in specific textbooks before and after revision. Comment: Post has asked the Ministry of Education for a copy of this chart. End Comment.

¶11. (C) According to Al-Lheedan, the SAG oversimplified textbooks in the 1980s, which "lead to multiple

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interpretations and abuses by teachers." He added that the MOE has now "removed unclear language from the primary school textbooks, clarified the language in the middle school textbooks, and offered detailed explanations in the high school textbooks." Al-Leheedan stated that we are moving from "the defensive to the offensive". He explained that by this he meant that having removed most intolerant language from Saudi textbooks, the MOIA now wanted to insert tolerant language. He echoed other Embassy contacts in emphasizing that the problem is the teachers -- not the textbooks.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Al-Leheedan remarked more than once that there is now a consensus for reform within the SAG that includes the King, Crown Prince and Senior Ulemah. His implication was that such a consensus had not always existed. We would agree. Only since 2003 has the SAG recognized religious intolerance as practiced by Takfiri zealots to be a direct threat to the regime. This led the twin pillars of Saudi stability, the princes and the religious scholars, to close ranks in an unprecedented and ongoing effort to remove the seeds of terrorism from Saudi mosques. How such efforts are proceeding overseas remains less clear. END COMMENT.  
GFOELLER